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## **PEORIA IS FIRST STEP IN SERIES OF STATEWIDE FORUMS ON IMPROVING CIVILITY AMONG LAWYERS**

A special Supreme Court committee, with the aid of the Illinois State Bar Association (ISBA), Wednesday launched a series of forums scheduled around the state to consider ways on how to improve civility among lawyers and enhance the public image of the legal profession.

About 40 lawyers and judges were to participate in the first forum, scheduled in Peoria on Wednesday, September 10. Other forums, at which representatives of the public are expected to be invited, will be held in Carbondale, Collinsville, Champaign-Urbana, Chicago, Rock Island, Springfield, DeKalb, Joliet and Oak Brook.

The forums are the latest effort by the Special Supreme Court Committee on Professionalism to find ways to help improve civility among lawyers. Another initiative by the Committee involved justices of the Supreme Court addressing incoming students at all the law schools in Illinois on the importance of professional conduct, and administering to the new students an oath of professionalism.

"You hear a lot about how the practice of law is different now than it was in days past when a lawyer's handshake meant something and a lawyer's word was his bond," said Justice Robert R. Thomas, who initiated the idea of the committee among his colleagues and who serves as Supreme Court liaison with the Committee. "That may be an oversimplification. But in this day and age with competition in the profession for dollars and clients, activities sometimes degenerate into a Rambo-style, win-at-all cost attitude by attorneys.

"That's what we're trying to correct with this committee."

David Rolewick, a Wheaton attorney who is chairperson of the Committee; Terrence Lavin of Chicago, president of the Illinois State Bar Association; and Robert Jenetten, president of the Peoria County Bar Association, welcomed the participants at the first forum.

At the Peoria meeting, the participants will discuss hypothetical scenarios keyed to lawyers' behavior in practical situations. The input from the Peoria meeting will be gathered with that from the other meetings and molded into proposals that will be presented to the Supreme Court for possible adoption.

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## **Lawyer Civility**

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One of the concepts behind the committee is to set a bar of voluntary behavior that is higher than that required by the Code of Conduct for lawyers, which is enforced by disciplinary sanctions.

“Professional conduct should not be considered the bottom threshold or floor of acceptable conduct, but instead it should be aspirational conduct that will lift our profession in the eyes of the public and to our own colleagues,” said Chief Justice Mary Ann G. McMorrow, in speaking to the incoming students at Northwestern University College of Law. “While professionalism is a higher standard expected of all lawyers, it imposes no official sanctions and offers no official reward.

“Yet, what is a greater sanction than loss of respect among your peers and judges? What is a greater reward than the self-satisfaction of doing the right thing for its own sake,” continued the Chief Justice.

Mr. Rolewick said that one of the reasons why attorneys may be engaging in rogue tactics is because their clients expect them to.

“Something that may be addressed by this committee is the issue of the public perception of the profession,” said Mr. Rolewick. “The general public wants, because they’ve been watching TV too much, the meanest junkyard dog that they can get, and they think they’re going to win if they hire the meanest, toughest lawyer they can get.”

Mr. Rolewick lauded the cooperation of the ISBA in helping to arrange the forums, and Mr. Lavin of the ISBA lauded the commitment of the Supreme Court in trying to improve civility among lawyers.

“This is not a pervasive problem by any means. The vast majority of lawyers engage in their professional pursuits everyday in a very professional manner,” said Mr. Lavin. “But all of us can do better. The Supreme Court has shown very strong leadership and a very firm commitment in trying to make sure civility among lawyers and with their clients is a hallmark of the profession in Illinois.”

The Special Committee was formed by the Court in November 2001.

Sonni C. Williams, assistant corporation counsel of the City of Peoria, is among its 12 members.